

# Built a Railroad With Firearms

Dramatic Story of the Construction of \$10,000,000 Worth of Property Out of Optimism and Nerve—Reads Like a Romance—Blizzards, Raids, Bankruptcy and Injunctions Failed to Deter Young Ashley.

BY MAUDE WOOD HENRY.

Back of the suit to set aside the sale of the Toledo & Ann Arbor railroad now pending in the United States court in Toledo, is a story, the dramatic story of the construction of \$10,000,000 worth of property out of optimism and nerve. The Ann Arbor railroad was once but the impracticable vision of old Governor Ashley. It became a reality through the indomitable will, the energy and gigantic proportions of his son Jim. James M. Ashley, Jr., stands six feet four in his stockings, and for fifteen years he has fought with his head and his hands for the development of a dream, until through him it has become one of the important factors of commerce. And now, whether the fruits of the labor of this Hercules will fall to him or another man, the courts are trying to decide.

In 1877, at the age of 60, old Governor Ashley found himself a bankrupt, then, of the many wrecks of the great panic. He looked about him for a fresh start in life. On his way he fell in with Colonel Thomas A. Scott, of Washington, and found him an interested listener.

Colonel Scott had been assistant secretary of war under Stanton, his duties being those of master of transportation. He heard Ashley through patiently, declared that this was a great country—the greatest on earth—and that the period of shrinkage in values and lying dormant was about past, and that there would be more miles of railroad built in the next fifteen years than in the last fifteen years in the United States. Scott then told Ashley that he thought he knew where he could get the rails and material for the road on credit, if he could raise the money for the remainder of the work.

The cherubic countenance of Governor Ashley brightened amazingly, his spirits arose, and he speedily retraced his steps during that tremendous conflict. He heard Ashley through patiently, declared that this was a great country—the greatest on earth—and that the period of shrinkage in values and lying dormant was about past, and that there would be more miles of railroad built in the next fifteen years than in the last fifteen years in the United States. Scott then told Ashley that he thought he knew where he could get the rails and material for the road on credit, if he could raise the money for the remainder of the work.

Gov. Ashley's Hornet's Nest.

About this time the great Michigan Central system passed into the hands of William H. Vanderbilt, owner of the New York Central, 60 miles north of New York. Ashley was caught up at both ends by hostile influences. Ashley's rainbow colored visions were rapidly vanishing, but, summoning up his courage, he of his own volition, and long and long, he issued \$2,500,000 of bonds and \$2,500,000 of stock, he consolidated the forty-five miles already built with the 100 miles not constructed, and setting introductions to bankers in New York who had begun to feel the confidence of better times, was able to borrow \$500,000 on the dollar on the bonds, and the next two years he constructed the additional 100 miles of road.

The year previous the Michigan Central had caused to be repaired the road from each end, in December, 1885, and were met with a refusal to cross and a show of force, backed by an array of injunctions, the situation looked rather desperate. Governor Ashley, Jr., then something over 20 years of age, was in charge of the road's construction, and realized how much the completion of this little 100 feet of track meant. He saw the \$200,000 of local aid fading away in the distance, and he knew what a financial smashup was in store if both ends failed to meet at the close of this era of construction. But the first-born son of the visionary old governor was made of stern stuff; there were six feet and four inches of him in him.

When the governor quaked at his desperate situation, young Ashley only ruffled up his bush of black hair and went to work. A little more than ten days remained for him to complete the track and earn the \$200,000. Up at the north end of the road, in the lumber camps, he gathered together a band of red-shirted desperadoes, and armed and disciplined them, as well as use two days' time permitted. Then he telegraphed in Toledo and called a equal body from the town and the city of that town. These were also armed with old muskets and bayonets, and on the night after Christmas the two bodies met at the railroad crossing near Howell. They proceeded at once to blast their way through the embankment on which the track of the other road was placed. If he could not pass over the Michigan Central tracks, he could dig a tunnel under them, and this he did. The tremendous convulsions of the dynamite aroused the villagers in Howell, and they came away, and they quickly flocked to the scene. The night was clear, cold and crisp, and brilliant moonlight, and at midnight, as the two divisions of the road were joined, the scene was one not easily forgotten. Amid the howls and shrill shriekings of locomotives, the explosion of dynamite cartridges and the hoarse cheering of a thousand men, young Ashley worked like a Trojan, shouting his directions to the mob, while he beat his hands together to keep them from freezing. That night a road train with a passenger coach attached passed over the track and the \$200,000 was really won. The Michigan Central railway was restored by the building of a substantial bridge over their tracks, and by noon Sunday, Ashley, Jr., with a few forces, satisfied with his work, a few hours afterward three trains crowded with workmen descended upon the Ann Arbor track, tore up a mile of it, carried off the rails, demolished the ties of the new bridge, filled up the gap through which the Ann Arbor road had run its first train and restored the Michigan Central track to its original condition, thus effectually rendering asunder the two divisions of the Ann Arbor road. This done, they threw out a strong armed guard to hold the crossing. These divisions did not suit young Ashley. By midnight Sunday he had returned with his red-shirted soldiers from the pine woods, and, following a long, this skirmish, advanced through the deep snow, as the he came on the guards, who stood but a few moments, answered with a handful of random shots, and,

boarding the waiting train, backed away down track. It was then the Ann Arbor's turn. The Michigan Central took up enough rails taken to replace the stolen ones, the embankment was again blasted out, cars were tipped over and converted into wrecks. On Monday morning young Ashley, the indomitable, was in complete armor and fortified possession of the battle ground. For four days and nights he stood at the officers of the law with their writs, until a judge friendly to the new road appeared on the scene, and then the writs began to fly more equally. The situation for twelve days through the bitterest cold and deepest snow known to that part of the country. During this time young Ashley worked and slept in his clothes and was almost incessantly on hand, keeping a strict watch. The farmers of the countryside were in hearty sympathy with the new road, and succeeded the Ashley force heavily throughout the siege. They brought great tubs of hot coffee, whole boiled hams, huge pans of bread and mince pies enough to work a structure in, even the iron-clad stomachs of the hardy woodmen. At the end of twelve days the governor, railroad commissioner and United States marshal arrived on the scene, and with all the majesty of the law acted the dispute. They ordained that trains should run on both roads and that status quo should be maintained until the courts could adjudicate the matter. Then they took young Ashley between them and marched him off to Detroit, under arrest for obstructing the United States court. He was arraigned before the United States court by District Judge Brown (now on the supreme bench) and fined \$102.50 and costs.

No Pay Roll For Six Months.

To illustrate the nerve and daring of these builders of the Ann Arbor railway, one could find a multitude of stories. For the history of this little road is a history of misfortune from start to finish; not only the misfortune of money, but the misfortune of natural causes—cold winters, blizzards, commercial depressions and a multitude of other things.

The construction of the Cadillac division from Mt. Pleasant to Cadillac, a distance of sixty-five miles, was begun in May, 1887. Arrangements had been made with New York bankers, by which \$1,000,000 had been guaranteed, and \$100,000 had been sent out to young Ashley for construction purposes. Three thousand men were gathered together and placed along the line in hastily constructed log huts, for the region was thinly populated by lumbermen only, and the road ran through a dense pine forest the whole distance. But no sooner were operations nicely commenced than a dispute arose in New York, suits against the elder Ashley were instituted by parties holding claims, and the entire issue of bonds which was to serve as collateral for the \$1,000,000 in loans, was attached. Consequently no more money came from that source during the entire period of construction, which extended over six months. In the meantime some \$500,000 of additional debt had been created and stoppage or suspension of the work even, most ruin for the Ashley and a receiver for the road. Young Ashley was acquainted with these facts about the 10th of August. He had less than \$100,000 in the bank, but the work was in full swing and his credit was unlimited. He promptly decided upon his course, purchased in Chicago, Detroit and Toledo carloads of provisions, thousands of dollars' worth of clothing, tobacco and all necessary supplies for feeding and caring for his 3,000 men, and with these in lieu of capital, completed the Cadillac division. There was no pay roll on the road for six months. When the monthly pay day came round Jim Ashley went out and addressed the men. They hailed from the pine woods, from jails and workhouses and city slums, and it took a clever man to handle them. They rioted among themselves and four or five were killed, but they behaved in young Jim, their giant boss, and punctured the paymaster's photograph which he put up for them to shoot at, instead of him. "Stand by me and you will get your money," Jim would tell them—and they did.

At last the hopeful buoyancy of the old governor and the activity and courage of his son completed the railroad across the state to Frankfort on Lake Michigan, a total length of 225 miles. A survey of the situation which the road reached Frankfort showed \$2,000,000 of bonds outstanding and \$1,000,000 of floating debt. While the earnings of this little 100 feet of track meant \$1,250,000 a year, the demands for equipment, and particularly the clamorous demands of the creditors, made a load that was ominous.

Making a Trunk Line. About this time the health of the elder Ashley had failed and Jim had taken his place in New York as acting president and financial agent. When he discovered the situation of affairs, particularly as to the large floating debt, he resolved upon the extension of the railroad across Lake Michigan. Across seventy miles of Lake Michigan and its 400 feet depths of stormy waters existed a rich and tempting field of traffic, and it was necessary to secure this field in order to achieve success.

In February, 1892, he called a meeting of the board of directors and placed before them the elaborate details of his plans for the construction of giant transports able to transport entire trains of cars across the deep water navigation of the lake, something never before attempted, thereby raising the railway from the position of a local line to the popular and dignified trunk line. The proposition was new and revolutionary. Some of the conservative directors resigned in alarm. The naval authorities at Washington and the lake marine authorities ridiculed the scheme and the marine insurance companies refused the offered risks. But the project was persisted in and carried to the great steamer-builders were placed with the Craig Ship-building company of Toledo. They were successfully launched, and in December, 1892, entered the lake service. It was difficult to man them; crews deserted and the nerve of captains failed. The two harbors, Frankfort and Kewauqua, had shallow entrances and were not safe to enter during storms. On the third trip out Ann Arbor No. 1 ran into one of the tremendous winter gales that sweep this stormy sea, and for three days the brave captain stood a few miles outside Frankfort harbor, unable to cross the shallow, seething bar. He faced and battled with a severe five mile an hour gale, and succeeded—no car moved, not one essential part of the great machine failed. This result proved the mechanical success of the plan. The insurance companies were anxious to insure, another naval review reversed the former decision and pronounced the enterprise practical. Traffic began to crowd the new route. Success appeared certain.

Then came the beginning of the great panic of 1893. McLead's syndicate had been overthrown, the cordage broken, prices in New York street began to fall rapidly, money became scarce, debts were pressing, creditors grew alarmed. Given inside information by an ex-director still in close social and political touch with the management, a powerful syndicate suddenly raided the securities of the Ann Arbor company—the stock was

forced down by sales of four times the total issue, from 42 to 10 in one day—April 25, 1893. All loans, amounting to \$2,000,000, were called. Defeated, penniless—for the younger Ashley had staked his last dollar upon success—father and son passed from the turmoil and conflict of fifteen years to the peace and rest that only defeat can know—in that single day. But the battle did not end here. And there is likely to be another chapter in the history of this railway, made famous by the courage and fighting ability of the Ashley, and unique by an exhibition of the legal acquisition of \$10,000,000 of property for nothing.

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